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ABSTRACT

This guide addresses the problem of decision-making in young children and the effect of a particular curriculum on the improvement of children's ability in this area. The term and the process of decision-making are defined, and career implications are discussed. The last section of the guide outlines a program designed to help teachers assist young people to make rational decisions which enable them to choose behaviors that are personally satisfying and socially constructive. The teacher's role is more specifically defined. Teaching strategies are outlined and organization of activity is presented. A final evaluation by participants is included. (Author/BEF)

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A CURRICULUM FOR CHOOSING

S. Lee Winocur

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A quote from Alice in Wonderland!

> "Cheshire Cat", Alice began rather timidly,
> "Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?"
> "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to . . .
> then it doesn't matter which way you go", said the Cat.

Millions of American youngsters today find themselves in exactly the same perplexing state as Alice, undecided as to "where they want to get to" and not knowing "which way to go".

From the moment they are born, we convince our children that all the important things should be decided by adults. Starting with parents in the home, and picked up by teachers at school, children in our society grow up believing that all the valid decisions will be made for them. They become convinced that they have neither the right nor the ability to decide anything for themselves. When the time comes for them to make a truly significant, even a crucial decision, they are stymied. They either choose not to act, which is a decision, or they base their choice upon the influences of chance relationships.

This does not have to happen. Students can be taught, beginning at very young ages, to take responsibility for their own behavior, to act independently, to work towards goals, and to make their own decisions.

Although teachers and counselors try to help youngsters learn to make personally satisfying choices, a major portion of school time is spent supplying information. Children in America are surfeited with information. They watch an average of 2,000 hours of television annually, containing 20,000 commercials. Yet, they are never taught how to use this information.

Studies in the area of career decision-making indicate that although students in Grade 12 have a great deal more data than students in Grade 4

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to help in choosing a career, they have no more skills in the use of that information than do their younger counterparts (Biggars, 1971). Information gathering is only one segment of the decision-making process. Not only do students not know how to use information, they lack the knowledge of the other parts of the process.

Decision-making can be taught (Thoresen, Mehrens, 1965; Ryan, 1968; Gelatt, et al., 1972). This skill, as with any other, develops with practice. Since the nature of decision-making is developmental, there should be concern about teaching students to make wise decisions beginning at an early age, before serious problems develop. Opportunities must be provided for students to choose, accompanied by systematic methods for appraising ability.

What is Decision-Making?

Decision-making happens whenever a person carefully evaluates data and then selects from two or more possible choices. A decision is limited by what a person is capable of doing, what he is willing to do, and what is of value to him. For successful decisions to be made, the student must have an objective appraisal of himself and his environment.

Involved in the process are the skills of knowing oneself, interpreting the behavior of others, analyzing what is happening, getting appropriate information, thinking of alternatives and understanding the consequences of each, and doing what is considered best, (see Figure 1).

We know that a student is aware of the process if, before acting, he consciously asks himself these questions:

- What is the problem?
- What is important to me?
- Where can I get help?
- What information do I need?
- What choices do I have?
- What might happen if I choose this way?
- Which choice is best for me?

The process of decision-making bridges the gap between thought and action. In order to facilitate its learning, we must be concerned with both knowledge of the process and its transfer into observable behavior. Decision-making may be considered to have been learned if:

1. The language of the process is part of the student's vocabulary.

2. The student can state the criteria for choice.

3. Knowledge of the process is transferred from the classroom to other life situations.

Our ability to decide is directly related to our ability to organize information. Although we are seldom aware of our need to organize the world, we do this all the time. Through a lifetime of responding to new situations, performing successfully in some and unsuccessfully in others, we develop a conscious information processing system. According to Borton (1970), this system is concerned with our relationship to the environment, our control over that environment, and our awareness of self. We depend on relationships, particularly with other people, for all the information which allows us to survive. Our concern for control develops because we want to control enough of our relationships to ensure our own life and growth. Concern for self develops because we are not only aware of our own interactions with the environment, but also because we are aware of being aware, and are constantly evaluating our own role in each interaction.

Our outlook on life constantly modifies our actions. When something is perceived as threatening, it is considered to be a problem which must be solved. If the problem is handled badly, a sense of inadequacy results. This affects our ability to respond to the next problem. Conversely, if a process can be found to handle the problem, our confidence is increased for meeting future situations. The student's ease in responding to a concern or a problem depends on whether appropriate processes are known for handling each situation. When they are, the student's self-esteem is enhanced.

Much has been written on the subject of information processing. Piaget (1958), in his studies of the development of logical thinking, proposed that we gather, through psychomotor activity, information from our environment. Because the individual, the event, and the environment constantly change, every activity brings new information to be categorized and ordered. If this information gathering process is sufficient, we reach a state of balance or equalibrium; we reconstruct a true picture of the external objective world in our mind.

As a child advances in the elementary grades, he or she enters what Piaget calls a phase of "concrete operations". This is a period in which the student "works at building real concepts according to logical operations". At this stage, adult support is required to ensure that the actions of the child will emerge in the direction of accepted knowledge or reality. The teacher is vital to the process.

Logical thought is not achieved by finding the component parts of mature thought and drilling children on them, hoping that eventually they will put them all together and be logical in their thinking. Children need opportunities to interact with a graded and suitably expanding, yet patterned portion of the environment. The instruction for decision-making depends on providing opportunities for children to transact with other people, things, and events. Lessons must occur in proper sequence, proportion, and balance. Students must become actors in their own learning, and the environment designed to suitably support developing mental, psychological, and social capacities. (Emans, 1973; Bruner, 1969; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Furth & Wachs, 1974; Kohlberg, 1971; Weinstein & Fantini, 1970; Brown, 1971; Simon, 1972; Howe & Howe, 1975).

Just as children become thinking individuals by applying "operational structures" to a variety of physical problems, they become part of the social community by applying these structures to social problems. In the first case, Piaget speaks of "operations". In the case of society, he calls it "co-operation". He encourages "active, intelligent exploration and evaluation of the social environment at every level of cognitive development".

The social environment is also an important aspect of affective development. In their description of the process of "internalization", English & English (1958) speak of adopting as one's own "the ideas, practices, and standards or values of another person or society". This concept helps to define the process by which children become sensitive to social stimuli. The culture is perceived as the controlling force to children's actions. Internalization provides for the development of conformity.

The process of decision-making, therefore, is vitally important. The cognitive and affective steps of the decision-making process act as handles for helping students to organize and understand their experiences. By applying the process, students learn to change with change. They remain flexible about what they want and, consequently, continue to grow. Successful decision-makers have great personal freedom. They are more likely to recognize, discover or create new opportunities and alternatives. They have greater control because they reduce the amount of uncertainty in their choices and limit the degree that chance or other people determine their future (Gelatt, 1965). They are able to collaborate with others while becoming more aware of their own unique characteristics and aspirations.

Curriculum Implications

If ways of dealing with problems are thought of as processes, as ways of experiencing, then there exists profound consequences for building a curriculum

for choosing. First, the purpose of such a curriculum should be to teach students new ways of dealing with information, new ways of perceiving, accommodating, acting, and obtaining feedback.

Similarly, in the affective area, if the objective of our program is to help students to be more independent, more responsive to other human beings, we need to involve them in experiences designed to help them realize that they need a particular process, to analyze how it works, and then to apply it. For instance, one of the processes involved in being more responsible and cooperative is the process of understanding the point of view of another person. In order to teach such a process, the teacher might label it "getting outside yourself". Students are asked to role-play a personal problem, such as a fight (acted out in slow motion). They first choose which side to be on, role-play, reverse sides, and role-play again. By switching sides, they gain an awareness of an entirely different personal and social self. Finally, they are asked to reapply their new understanding of "getting outside yourself" by trying to understand the perspective of an opponent in a situation outside the classroom and reporting the results.

The curriculum of decision-making is a curriculum for change. It meets the student's need to learn processes by which habitual responses can be modified and alternatives increased for dealing with, or changing, environment. As long as the interaction between the changing self and the changing environment can be handled, the learning will be exciting and worthwhile.

The role of the teacher of this curriculum is not to act as a private counselor, or deal with concerns which are private (Bates & Johnson, 1972). The curriculum deals with real and immediate problems, but its purpose is to teach an understanding of a culturally accepted process and give the student practice in its use.

The curriculum is built on the development of self-consciousness, for it is consciousness which is being trained. Students are encouraged not only to step outside their own experiences and to question them, but also to observe and question their ways of experiencing.

The process is easily described. Suppose someone tells you that your begging and whining are just not going to work to get you something that you desire. You might begin to wonder whether or not they are right and start watching yourself. You discover that you have, in fact, harbored the idea that begging is the best way of getting what you want. Upon analyzing this feedback, you decide that your behavior does not fit with other values and ideals which you hold, such as being independent and self-reliant. Therefor, you decide to explore new patterns of behavior. The same process holds true for academic spheres of activity (Borton, 1970).

All of us work at learning more about ourselves. However, in a society where the environment is changing with incredible speed, such learning cannot be left to chance. More and more, we are required to be flexible and change, while maintaining a sense of self. A curriculum with this goal educates children in their own humanity and gives them the power to change their lives by changing the processes they use.

Implications for LAUNCH

Laboratory Activities to Understand and Nurture CHoosing is an activity-centered program intended to stimulate the development of cognitive tools for dealing with affective states. LAUNCH is designed to help the teacher assist young people to make rational decisions which will enable them to choose behaviors that are both personally satisfying and socially constructive. The program is a total educational approach ... it is not a subject to be taught. It is a method and an attitude that is applied to every subject and to every interrelationship between adult and child.

The goals of the program are:

1. To help the learner develop and use the process of decision-making.

2. To encourage teachers and counselors to utilize decision-making techniques with other students and to provide opportunities for choosing.

3. To familiarize parents with the decision-making process and its importance for enhancing the growth of young people.

LAUNCH activities are performed for the productive thinking that the child must do, not for the learning of specific subject matter or for rules in making decisions. Indeed, current research indicates that each of us has a preferred cognitive style which influences our approach to the process (Ewing, 1977). The activity of children and their comprehension of what they are doing, and why they are doing it, are all important. Results are not stressed for their own sake, but for the feedback they provide to further the child's thinking. The student is encouraged by the teacher to select from self (inside) and social (outside) information available to him or her, and to treat that data in a particular way. Diagrammatically, the operation can be represented very simply. (see Figure 2.)

PARADIGM OF LAUNCH CHOOSING PROCESS:

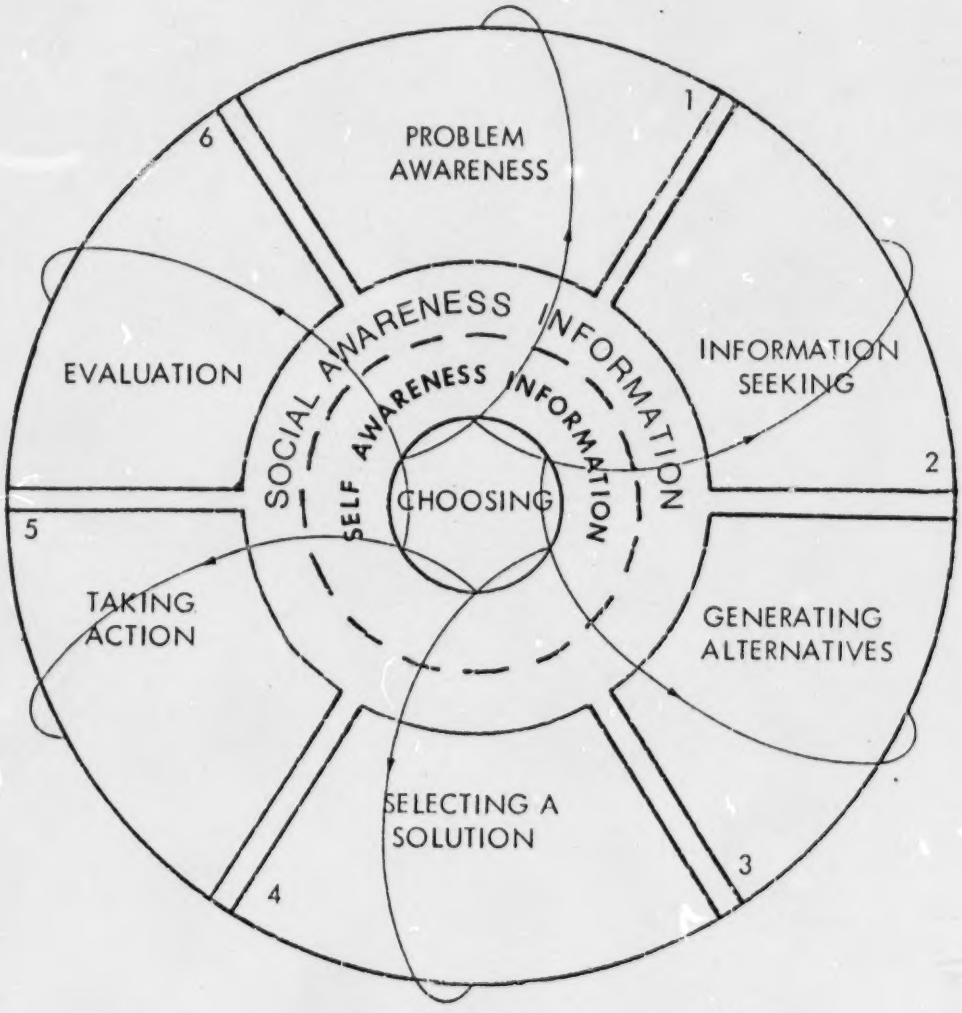

FIGURE 2

The choosing process emanates from Self and Social information as used in the six decision-making operations. The process is cyclical and perpetual. After action is taken, Self and Social information is modified which, in turn, alters the information available for future operations.

The LAUNCH curriculum strives for the integration of self and social awareness with the development of cognitive skills. Such a balance is considered essential for learning and growth to occur.

LAUNCH is based on the premise that there is a direct relationship between cognitive processes such as classifying, ordering, synthesizing and evaluating, and affective processes such as awareness, accommodation and action. Table 1 on the following page describes the predominant mental and psychological operations cultivated by the curriculum for choosing.

Each LAUNCH activity described in this handbook causes the student to think in order to respond. The thinking that the student is required to do is on a higher, more complex level than the rudamentary type of thinking involved in the acts of memorizing and recalling. As students become more skilled in the decision-making process, they gain confidence and good judgment in applying the process to other learning situations. A major benefit of the program is the easy transfer of general habits of information processing to other fields of academic knowledge.

In this program, the major responsibility of the teacher is the establishment of a safe classroom environment in which open and productive thinking will develop and prosper. How can such a climate come about? It happens when the teacher ...

- helps students to see the value of developing decision-making skills.
- accepts a wide variety of responses to activities.
- encourages questions from students.
- respects each question which is asked.
- responds to questions in a thoughtful way.
- listens.
- cultivates differences of opinion.
- encourages students to express their own points of view.
- allows students to make decisions in the classroom.
- encourages students to try things on their own.
- allows students to draw their own conclusions.
- helps students to learn from one another.
- encourages independent thought and action.
- allows students to make mistakes.

NEWPORT-MESA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
PROJECT LAUNCH

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

TABLE 1

• • • compiled by S. Lee Winocur

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS	PREDOMINANT THINKING OPERATIONS	PERSONALITY FACTORS	EXPECTED BEHAVIORS
Self-Awareness:			
. Physical self	Cognition	Introspection	Identifies physical self
. Interests	Memory	Awareness	Identifies interests
. Abilities	Analysis	Valuing, Prizing	Identifies abilities
. Emotions			Identifies feelings and hunches
. Values			Identifies values
Social Awareness:			
. Perception of others	Cognition	Awareness	Identifies characteristics of others
. Interpersonal communication	Analysis	Objectivity	Interprets nonverbal clues
		Attending	Interprets verbal clues
. Individual behavior		Responding	Describes own behavior
. Group awareness			Identifies group roles
Problem Awareness:			Is observant
			Is socially aware
. Identifying criteria	Cognition	Objectivity	Identifies problem criterion constraints
	Application		Views situations objectively
	Analysis		Recognizes differing points of view
. Problem identification			Identifies the problem
Information Gathering:		Curiosity	Is persistent
		Attending	Is curious
. Data gathering	Application	Responding	Asks many questions
	Analysis	Tolerance for complexity	Analyzes feelings and desires of others
		Persistence	Uses a variety of information sources
. Data selection		Respect for individuality	Identifies relevant information
Generating Alternatives:	Synthesis/ Divergent	Creativity	Is inventive
		Tolerance for ambiguity	Reorganizes knowledge and experience
. Fantasizing	. Fluency	Tolerance for failure	Fantasizes
	. Flexibility	Intellectual freedom	
. Predicting	. Originality		
	. Elaboration		
Identifying a Solution:			Understands sequence/step-by-step procedures
	Evaluation/	Well-organized	Visualizes a plan and outcome
	Convergent	Self-disciplined	Describes his/her decision
. Weighing consequences	. Classifying		Recognizes relationships
	. Ordering	Internalization	Makes comparisons
	. Relating cause and effect		Anticipates probability of outcomes
			Weighs consequences
			Sees cause and effect
. Determining risk			Is not overly concerned with being right
Taking Action:			Can be a risk-taker
			Co-operates
. Determining strategy	Evaluation	Co-operating	Chooses
. Evaluating position		Internalizing	Has data to support his/her decision
		Risking	Sticks with a decision
. Planning		Persistence	
		Taking responsibility for results	

USING THE PROGRAM

The activities in LAUNCH enable the teacher to integrate the cognitive, affective and social components of the Curriculum for Choosing.

The format of this handbook is designed to provide the teacher with a rationale for the LAUNCH program, activities in the areas of Self Awareness, Social Awareness and Choosing, and Evaluation strategies and instruments. The Choosing section incorporates the categories of Problem Awareness, Information Gathering, Generating Alternatives, Identifying a Solution and Taking Action and Planning. Included are interdisciplinary experiences for Grades K-8, employing Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Language Arts, Physical Education, Art, and Career Education.

Each area has been indexed so that it is possible to easily locate the activities for each decision-making component. For example, activities which help in teaching the skill of "recognizing differing points of view" are located in the Problem Awareness Index.

Each section has been sub-divided into three major teaching strategies: Large Group, Small Group and Independent Tasks.

LARGE GROUP ACTIVITIES

. introduce the decision-making curriculum to a more structured environment. These activities are to be supplemented with opportunities for student interaction (Small Group) and individual choosing (Independent Tasks), in order that students gain practice in the skills being learned.

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES

. constitute the heart of the LAUNCH program. In the Small Group (8-10 students), the teacher keeps in mind information he or she wishes to transmit to the group as a whole. The teacher's purpose is primarily in the Cognitive domain. Since group discussion allows for the exploration of ideas, concepts and opinions, considerable attention is paid to involving the students with one another. The function of the group is to help each student learn skills which enable him/her to cope with the demands of the culture and to become a functioning member of that culture (Bates & Johnson, 1972).

INDEPENDENT TASKS

. provide the primary means for implementing choosing in the classroom. The use of Learning Centers, containing self-instructional (independent) tasks, allow children to assume responsibility for their own learning. They make decisions regarding which activities to select, the rate they will progress, where to work, when and where to move, with whom to talk, and evaluation of their progress. This does not happen all at once. Differing students learn or accept increasing decision-making and responsibility at different rates. The classroom becomes a learning laboratory with many alternatives, permitting personal growth and independence (Mitchell, 1977).

It is understood that not all areas of schooling are conducive to individual choice. However, some opportunity must be provided for students to systematically learn the skills needed to set and achieve personal goals. Such opportunities give purpose and direction for learning (Howe & Howe, 1975).

Organization of an Activity

The format for each activity follows the steps of the LAUNCH decision-making model:

PROBLEM

. each activity is initiated by a student need, identified during field-testing of the materials.

GOAL

. defined in behavioral terms, this is an outcome to be observed by the teacher.

INFORMATION

. is provided, including:

Resource: Some handbook activities were adapted from published materials. Credit is listed in this section.

Time: Since the extent of discussion varies with each group, only an approximate time is given.

Materials: These are listed to facilitate preparation for each activity. All materials suggested are readily available to the average classroom.

On the reverse side of selected task cards (printed on index paper) is displayed the prototype of an accompanying worksheet ready for duplication. The teacher is encouraged to duplicate one worksheet for each student.

WAY . lists the name of the activity.

ACTION . LAUNCH activities employ a variety of Small Group techniques, including games, role-playing, multi-media materials, brainstorming, modeling, imitation and group discussion. Questions are provided which facilitate student interaction and follow-up.

EVALUATION . a Criterion Referenced Objective is described for each activity. A sample test item for each objective is provided in the Evaluation section of this handbook.

For further information contact:

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